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"Yes, friends, these clouds. . .
Are. . .stage machinery":

An Exploration of Subject in John Ashbery

Shauna Sutherland

Honors Essay

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April 23, 1996

John Ashbery emerged in the late 1950's as an avant-garde experimentalist. His critical attention has varied remarkably since that time to the extent that he is now considered by some to be an "utterly academic poet."¹ His early volumes, such as *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), often received harsh criticism. This particular volume was simply labeled "garbage" by reviewer John Simon.² Of course, Ashbery has always had his evident admirers, such as Harold Bloom, who links Ashbery wholeheartedly with his great American forefathers Emerson, Whitman and Stevens. But even Bloom's most complimentary articles on Ashbery include such statements as the one that he is at his best "when he dares to write most directly in the idiom of Stevens."³ At this writing, it seems that Ashbery has been widely accepted by academia, but the fact remains that no one (even Ashbery himself) has been able to define his poetic project. In fact, the ongoing critical debate may have little to offer the reader who picks up an Ashbery book for the first time. Anyone who does not dismiss his work as "garbage" and wishes to work towards a better understanding of Ashbery may have a difficult time planning a critical approach. We might begin

¹Robert Bly. *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity*. p. 316.

²A quote from John Simon's article "More Brass Than Enduring," in the Autumn 1962 volume of *Hudson Review*. pp. 457-58. But I found this reference in the introduction of the critical volume *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*. p. 21.

³Harold Bloom. "John Ashbery: The Charity of the Hard Moments." *Contemporary Poetry in America*. p. 112.

with techniques that have been applied to more traditional poets. But the undeniably unique nature of Ashbery's work asks us to move on to an approach that accepts his work on its own terms.

Several critics have appropriately noted Ashbery's connection to traditions such as Romanticism and Abstract Expressionism. Quite often these critical accounts make generalizations about Ashbery's poetry without addressing how specific poems operate. Similarly, some critics have chosen a singular theme or motif, such as time or memory, and formed a discussion around quotations from his poems which fit these categories. What these essays often fail to mention is that any theme we find in an Ashbery poem could disappear in the next line as he moves on to something totally unrelated. While I agree that certain themes do reappear in Ashbery's poetry, I feel it would be incorrect to isolate just one or two themes as representative of Ashbery. For me, the most useful critical accounts focus on one or two poems and discuss how each poem works as a whole.

I would also suggest that criticism which attempts to explore the reading process is more helpful than criticism which focuses on the meaning of Ashbery poems. Often it seems that it is not the ideas or themes in the poems that are most important, but rather what the poetry is trying to say about itself and about the reader. In fact, I feel that Ashbery authorizes intensive reader participation in his poetry. He has said that he really has no "message" in mind

while writing; instead, the writing becomes his thoughts on paper, and we are encouraged to form our own associations from these thoughts he offers.⁴ David Walker notes this emulation of thought process in Ashbery's work: "The wonder of Ashbery's work, it seems to me, is the ways it finds to use his extraordinary resources of voice to turn admittedly personal experience outward, to make the fluid discontinuous process of thinking as real and immediate to the reader as to the poet."⁵ But the difficulty for me lies in distinguishing between "thought process" and what Ashbery consciously places in the poem to have some desired effect on the reader. While I do think that certain poems could be the result of Ashbery simply transcribing his thoughts, I sense in other poems that he is toying with the reader knowingly. Part of the difficulty in reading Ashbery is this contradiction between his game-playing and the instances when his poetry seems more straightforward and even highly emotional. He offers us no prescription for reading his work and no real clue about his intentions. Each reader must devise his/her own personal method for reading the poetry.

In beginning this critical project, I first had to find a way into the the poems, so to speak. Reading Ashbery poems for the first time I constantly found myself trying to locate

⁴The pertinent quote is as follows: "I think my poems mean what they say. . .but there is no message, nothing I want to tell the world particularly except what I am thinking when I am writing.--J.A. From an interview in the *Paris Review*, entitled "The Art of Poetry XXXIII." Peter Stitt, interviewer. p. 44.

⁵David Walker. *The Transparent Lyric*. p. 185-86.

their subjects, often to no avail. I did this because I have been trained to ask the question about subject while reading traditional poetry. My next reaction was to question whether or not this was an appropriate way to approach an Ashbery poem. But I eventually discovered that exploring the problem of subject would allow me to address other aspects of his work as they present themselves to a patient and open-minded reader.

I have thus decided to consider this project a search for subject within a few select Ashbery poems. I will attempt to trace my reading of each of these poems from start to finish. I have chosen as exemplary texts three poems from Ashbery's collection *Houseboat Days* (1977).⁶ Two of these poems greatly complicate the search for subject. Just when we feel we have located the poem's center, Ashbery will pull back and erase that subject in an effort to challenge the reader. At the close of these particular poems we experience a sense of an absence of subject, unless we consider the possibility that the poems may very well be about themselves or about Ashbery's poetic process in general. But the third poem I will discuss complicates this generalization about

⁶My decision to discuss *Houseboat Days* is basically an arbitrary one. Mostly it is because I especially enjoy these poems and because I am interested in exploring why they might affect me more than other Ashbery poems. In addition, *Houseboat Days* might be considered "representative" of Ashbery only because it was published approximately in the middle of his career, chronologically speaking. Also, it was the book he published after his Pulitzer-Prize winning collection *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Perhaps this might be considered the peak of his critical fame.

subject in Ashbery by offering a seemingly coherent and constant subject and even a strong sense of emotion.

Two more caveats: 1. Is it possible to approach this enterprise on a completely serious level, considering Ashbery's tendency to trick the reader? 2. I must note that any exploration of Ashbery will have to be a tentative one. This paper represents my best effort over the past six months to understand my personal response to Ashbery's poetry and I certainly do not consider it definitive. My hope is that it will help me to better understand my desire to search for subject in Ashbery's work.

At the same time I recognize that I should also be prepared to abandon a preoccupation with subject in order to enjoy the poems on their own terms. I will close with a consideration of the possibility that subject affects my value judgment of Ashbery poems. Finally, I will attempt to pull back from my discussion of subject and ask whether or not Ashbery poems actually benefit from critical treatment.

The Poems.

Readers often begin to formulate an idea about subject just by reading the title of a poem. However, Ashbery's titles do not always accurately reflect the subjects within his poems; in fact, the titles sometime seem entirely random. In the case of the three poems I have chosen to consider,

however, the titles contribute to my understanding of Ashbery's treatment of subject. For example, the title of the first text, "*And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name*," which is both difficult and helpful, suggests immediately that the poem will have some relation to the visual arts. The Latin phrase from the title commonly refers to the notion of ekphrasis, the literary representation of visual art.⁷ In Ashbery's poetry, the two disciplines are not competing forces; instead the visual arts and poetry complement one another and can even be used to help explain each other. In "*And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name*," painting and poetry are almost interchangeable in the beginning. As the poem progresses, however, the focus moves increasingly towards the art of poetry. The poem opens with an artist figure struggling to find a proper mode of expression:

You can't say it that way any more.
Bothered about beauty you have to
Come out into the open, into a clearing,
And rest. Certainly whatever funny happens to you
Is OK. To demand more than this would be strange
Of you, you who have so many lovers,
People who look up to you and are willing
To do things for you, but you think
It's not right, that if they really knew you. . .
So much for self-analysis.

The figure is presumably primarily a poet, since he is searching for a way to "say it." (Although what "it" stands for is unclear.) The poet suggests that "whatever funny

⁷James Heffernan defines "ekphrasis" in his book *Museum of Words*. p. 1. The book also discusses Ashbery's poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," which was inspired by Parmigianino's painting of the same name.

happens" can become part of a poem, but then he quickly becomes distracted and lapses into "self-analysis." In these opening lines the poet is characterized as a tortured artist figure, one who has many lovers and loyal admirers but who is ultimately misunderstood. This dramatic characterization cannot be taken wholly seriously; Ashbery seems to be poking fun at the traditional notion of the self-absorbed artist figure.

The speaker quickly recovers from his moment of doubt and goes on to offer detailed instructions on how to construct a "poem-painting." The list of things that should be included seems almost arbitrary, like bits of nostalgic detail that emerge from the poet's subconscious:

. . .Now,
About what to put in your poem-painting:
Flowers are always nice, particularly delphinium.
Names of boys you once knew and their sleds,
Skyrockets are good--do they still exist?

Up to this point, the poetic elements the speaker includes are somewhat contrived, but they are also striking for their innocence and naivete. However, the following lines suggest an almost cold objectivity concerning the writing process:

There are a lot of other things of the same quality
As those I've mentioned. Now one must
Find a few important words, and a lot of low-keyed,
Dull-sounding ones.

The speaker now presents an entirely artificial writing process, one that goes completely against the romantic notion of poetic inspiration. With these lines Ashbery might be criticizing an attempt to reduce poetry to this almost-mechanical level. But this prescription for poetry seems familiar; we could imagine that Ashbery himself applies these techniques to his own work. The next few lines offer an example of the type of poetry he has described, and the effect is both surprisingly pleasing and characteristically Ashbery:

She approached me
About buying her desk. Suddenly the street was
Bananas and the clangor of Japanese instruments.
Humdrum testaments were scattered around. His head
Locked into mine. We were a seesaw.

These lines in fact include the obligatory "dull-sounding" words as well as a few "important" ones, such as "Japanese" (because it is capitalized and suggests foreign exoticism) and "testaments" (which has historical and religious overtones). It would seem at this stage of the poem that the focus has shifted from the attitudes of a generalized artist-speaker to those of Ashbery himself. I am even tempted to say that Ashbery may be having fun with his own poetic style, reducing it to a formula while at the same time reminding us how charming the result of such a formula may be.

I am further convinced of the personal nature of this poem as I read the final lines. The voice in this section is

that of an experienced poet, and the deeply emotional and self-reflective tone tempts us to attribute the sentiments directly to Ashbery:

. . .Something
Ought to be written about how this affects
You when you write poetry:
The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to
communicate
Something between breaths, if only for the sake
Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
For other centers of communication, so that understanding
May begin, and in doing so be undone.

The first three lines of this passage contribute to our desire to substitute Ashbery for the speaker. If the speaker suggests that "something ought to be written," and Ashbery writes this poem, then it follows logically that Ashbery could be the speaker. These lines could even be considered a confession of Ashbery's own attitudes towards writing. There is a sense of vulnerability on his part, since he is aware of the fact that his poems must be abandoned as the reader moves on to the next "center of communication." Ashbery seems to consider this a natural and expected process, yet at the same time I could imagine another poet might be saddened by a reader who moves on and quickly forgets a poem.

But this autobiographical reading I have constructed may be completely inaccurate. Ashbery certainly knows of the reader's desire to locate his persona within the poem; in fact, I immediately began to refer to the poet-speaker of

this poem as "he." These final emotionally-charged lines might just as well be a playful comment on the reader's tendency to look for the author. But perhaps he is also indulging his own need to confess his feelings about the writing profession. For instance, he compares the "extreme austerity of an almost empty mind" to the lush "foliage of its desire to/ communicate." This somewhat naive sentiment is intensified by the choice of the phrase "Rousseau-like" to describe the foliage. The French painter Henri Rousseau was known for the beautiful, yet naively-executed foliage which dominated his paintings.⁸ If Ashbery is truly addressing his own art in this passage, it is to compare his lush poetic descriptions to the painter's fanciful foliage. Perhaps he is even toying with the reader's tendency to search for a deeper emotional meaning in this passage when his intention is actually to add lush texture to the conclusion.

As with many Ashbery poems, the subject of "And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name" is no more clearly defined at the conclusion than at the beginning. I might suggest that the subject of the relationship between art and poetry that appears in the title returns with the reference to Rousseau and therefore becomes the unifying subject of the poem. But I could also support the assertion that the poem is mainly

⁸Daniel Catten Rich. *Henri Rousseau*. p. 19. Rich discusses Rousseau's "jungle pictures" such as *Storm in the Jungle* (1891). Rousseau's friends described these paintings as memoirs of a trip to Mexico. However, we now know that his "exotic flora" was inspired by trips to the Paris Zoo and Botanical Gardens. He apparently collected leaves and grasses to treasure in his studio.

concerned with examining the actual writing process since it includes the formula for creating a poem. However, this reading would be complicated by the fact that this description of poetic process actually becomes part of a larger poem. For lack of a better term, I might call this "meta-poetry." If I decided that this "meta-poetry" becomes the primary subject of the poem, I would still have to reconcile the final lines of the poem which are more focused on the poet than the poetry. And while it is tempting to consider the conclusion as Ashbery's own comment on the poet's life, I could not say with certainty that these were his actual thoughts at the time of writing. Of course, I can never finally know what Ashbery was thinking and even if I discovered a written explanation of this poem in an interview, for example, I could not even rely on Ashbery's honesty.⁹

Therefore, I must admit that there is finally an absence of definitive subject in "*And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name*" and that the obscuring of subject actually adds to my enjoyment of the poem. And as the ending suggests, I can move on to "other centers of communication," which in this case happens to be another poem from *Houseboat Days*.

⁹This statement refers to the fact that much of what Ashbery says about his own poetic process is contradictory. When asked about his reasons for writing, he often says things such as, "*What I am probably trying to do is to illustrate opacity and how it can suddenly descend over us rather than trying to be willfully obscure.*" (Italics are mine.) Either Ashbery is unsure of his motivations or he has simply decided not to share them in a straightforward manner. This quote comes from an interview entitled "The Craft of John Ashbery" by Louis A. Osti. From *Confrontation*, Fall 1974. p. 87.

"The Wrong Kind of Insurance"

I believe that the poem "The Wrong Kind of Insurance" even further complicates the search for subject. While there was at least a constant speaker in "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name" (the poet figure who *might* be Ashbery himself), "The Wrong Kind of Insurance" presents a speaker who seems to disappear and reappear in various forms throughout the poem. At first glance the title of this particular poem offers us little information about its subject. For instance, does the "wrong" kind of insurance refer to the amount of coverage or to the actual "kind" of insurance (eg. fire, auto, life)? And what does any of this have to do with poetry? A reader could puzzle over this title indefinitely, so it seems best to simply dive into the poem, which begins with Ashbery's characteristically comical tone:

I teach in a high school
And see the nurses in some of the hospitals,
And if all teachers are like that
Maybe I can give you a buzz some day,
Maybe we can get together for lunch of coffee or something.

My first response was sheer elation; a well-defined speaker (a high-school teacher) appearing so early in the poem. But in re-reading the stanza, I become increasingly confused by the speaker's words. For instance, what do the nurses have to do with the teachers, and why would the speaker say "if

all teachers are like that" if s/he is presumably a teacher as well? Why is the teacher using trite pick-up lines to ask someone out on a date? Finally, I must question whether or not the high school teacher is actually the real speaker of the poem.

For instance, the language in stanza two is quite different from the teacher's argot from a few lines before; but it is still possible to keep the teacher in mind as a speaker. The first line of this stanza evokes a setting that might very well be found in a high school:

The white marble statues in the auditorium
Are colder to the touch than the rain that falls
Past the post-office inscription about rain or snow
Or gloom of night. I think
About what these archaic meanings mean,
That unfurl like a rope ladder down through history,
To fall at our feet like crocuses.

On the other hand, how many high school auditoriums contain white marble statues? Perhaps Ashbery has moved on to an art museum or to the home of a wealthy art patron. And as I re-read this stanza, the voice of the speaker does seem too inconsistent with stanza one. For the time being, I will allow the teacher to disappear in favor of a wiser, almost prophetic speaker. The new speaker presents the first subject of the poem as the search for meaning in history. The white marble statues evoke notions of high art and antiquity, but they become only cold and distant monuments to the past and offer little real meaning for the speaker. Ashbery then

complicates the notion of art by mentioning the post office inscription. This is a bit of uniquely American folklore that we take for granted every day, but by including it directly after the statues Ashbery implies that the inscription might also be instilled with historic meaning and value. Whoever the speaker is, s/he is challenging in this stanza "archaic meanings" of all types. The nature of these "archaic meanings" is further challenged by their comparison to crocuses. These meanings which are constantly imposed on us by tradition and history may be just as unnatural as the image of crocuses falling at our feet rather than growing upwards.

The next stanza actually seems to answer the speaker's question of "what these archaic meanings mean." The answer is that maybe there are no answers to questions such as this that plague us constantly, and even if answers do exist we will never be able to discover them. All we can do is abandon the search for answers and focus instead on experiencing life:

All of our lives is a rebus
Of little wooden animals painted shy,
Terrific colors, magnificent and horrible,
Close together. The message is learned
The way light at the edge of a beach in autumn is learned.

The final line of this passage is somewhat difficult for me. Can light at the edge of the beach actually be learned or is it only experienced by the viewer? I think perhaps what

Ashbery is suggesting is that the light is seen, experienced, and appreciated for its beauty rather than learned in an empirical sense. Therefore, the "message" or the answer to the rebus cannot be learned all at once but must be experienced throughout life. Ashbery makes it even less possible for humans to gain a real understanding of the world by altering the most basic details of life. For instance, the following lines represent a dramatic shift in the seasonal cycle on Earth:

The seasons are superimposed.
In New York we have winter in August
As they do in Argentina and Australia.
Spring is leafy and cold, autumn pale and dry.
And changes build up
Forever, like birds released into the light
Of an August sky, falling away forever
To define the handful of things we know for sure,
Followed by musical evenings.

This superimposition of the seasons results in a new constructed view of the world; one where spring can be both leafy and cold, where changes can build up yet be scattered into the light at the same time. The most curious aspect of these lines is the role of "changes." It is contradictory to suggest that changes can define the "things we know for sure," since they would seem to challenge what we are most familiar with and accept as truth. But perhaps Ashbery is toying with the old adage "the more things change the more they stay the same." Another possibility is that it is not the changes but the birds he compares them to which define

what we know for sure, an even stranger comparison to consider. But my momentary confusion with this concept of change is quickly replaced by the disorienting phrase "musical evenings" which has no obvious reference.

A quick recapitulation of the poem up to this point might be useful. So far we have encountered a speaker in the first stanza who seems to have little connection to the ideas that follow. The decidedly casual and personal tone of the first stanza changes to a more lyrical, philosophical one in the second and third stanzas. The dual-subject which emerges in these stanzas concerns questions of history and human perception. This is admittedly a rather vague explanation of subject. But the fourth stanza increasingly blurs the subject as the speaker now addresses us directly in a ceremonial manner:

Yes, friends, these clouds pulled along on invisible ropes
Are, as you have guessed, merely stage machinery,
And the funny thing is it knows we know
About it and still wants us to go on believing
In what it so unskillfully imitates, and wants
To be loved not for that but for itself:
The murky atmosphere of a park, tattered
Foliage, wise old treetrunks, rainbow tissue-paper wadded
Clouds down near where the perspective
Intersects the sunset. . .

I might suggest that this stanza is still concerned with the natural world of shifting seasons and birds. Perhaps the "it" stands for the natural landscape and these lines are a critique of the artificial nature humans have created. We have imposed our own meanings on nature and constructed our

own theatrical, mythical version of the world. And in these lines nature is crying out to be "loved not for that but for itself."

While I do believe that this idea of a personified nature could be supported by the text, I also believe that we should be wary of addressing this stanza in a completely serious, straightforward manner. For a moment, let me consider once again the teacher from stanza one. Couldn't I also suggest that s/he returns in this stanza as a theater coach or school play director? The "clouds pulled along on invisible ropes" (and also the "rainbow tissue-paper wadded" clouds) could be part of the set on a high school stage, in the same auditorium from stanza two. I could imagine an overly-enthusiastic drama teacher delivering this dramatic monologue (or the whole poem) to a group of uninspired students. And the last few lines of the stanza could be an attempt to speak to the students on a deeply personal level:

We too are somehow impossible, formed of so many
different things,
Too many to make sense to anybody.
We straggle on as quotients, hard-to-combine
Ingredients, and what continues
Does so with our participation and consent.

While it is possible to attribute these lines to the teacher (although I don't feel this is the most plausible scenario), the next-to-last stanza of the poem would be considered the words of a madman if they were delivered by anyone other than

Ashbery. Quite suddenly, the lines no longer make logical sense and we begin to feel as if the entire poem is unravelling before our eyes:

Try milk of tears, but it is not the same.
The dandelions will have to know why, and your comic
Dirge routine will be lost on the unfolding sheaves
Of the wind, a lucky one, though it will carry you
Too far, to some manageable, cold, open
Shore of sorrows you expected to reach,
Then leave behind.

Are the personified dandelions part of the school stage set? What could "milk of tears" possibly refer to? Evidently, we are not meant to understand these lines. Ashbery purposely allows the poem to spin itself out in non-sensical phrases, just as he purposely teases the reader with the focus on history and nature. These are probably not the definitive subjects of the poem, nor is the teacher the likely true speaker of the poem. The subject of the poem (if it has one) may finally be itself; the way it can impose itself on the reader yet instantly disappear (as in the final lines), the way it can challenge the reader's preconceived notions of how a poem should operate.

Finally, I consider the poem an example of the rebus stanza two presents. The search for the "message" the poem contains will be a fruitless one, and it may be more satisfying to discuss the poem in terms of the statements it makes about itself and possibly about Ashbery's work in general. This poem, like so much of Ashbery's work, could be

compared precisely to a cloud "pulled along on invisible ropes." Even the reader is pulled along through the stanzas, briefly experiencing emotions ranging from amusement to self-reflection to mere confusion. Is Ashbery in part exploring his project here, as in "*And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name?*" Perhaps this poem is like a "rainbow tissue-paper wadded cloud," which wants to be loved for its theatrical, fanciful and even artificial self. Ashbery is possibly drawing attention to how his poem "unskillfully imitates" other poetry, how its "ingredients" are "hard-to-combine." But at the same time, he acknowledges that the difficulty of the poem is validated by our choosing to read it and engage with it. Ashbery continues to write "with our participation and consent."

The final lines of the poem might reflect Ashbery's recognition of the reader's exhaustion and frustration with a poem such as "*The Wrong Kind of Insurance.*" But the frustration at the randomness of the final phrases will turn to resignation, as the poem finally draws to a close and dissipates like one of the clouds mentioned in the poem:

Thus, friend, this distilled,
Dispersed musk of moving around, the product
Of leaf after transparent leaf, of too many
Comings and goings, visitors at all hours.
Each night
Is trifoliate, strange to the touch.

I have experienced many "comings and goings" of subject and speaker in this poem, each of them "strange to the touch." But once I can accept that Ashbery is toying with me, I can delight in the strangeness and how the poem challenges me throughout.

This brings me back to the poem's title. While it was difficult to imagine what bearing it had on the poem in the beginning, perhaps I could now apply the title to myself as a reader. Of course, there is a possibility that the speaker is the one with the wrong kind of insurance. But since we have not been able to accurately pinpoint the speaker it is difficult to connect him/her with the title. Considering what I have tentatively suggested as the final subject of the poem--that it is about itself and the way it can play games with the reader--it is possible to suggest that as a reader I have taken out the "wrong kind of insurance" on the poem. If I entered into the poem with preconceptions about the way poems traditionally operate and unfold for discussion, I would be unprepared for the pitfalls that Ashbery includes along the way; the shift in speakers, the abrupt changes of tone, the mysterious theatrical details, and of course, the ending which slowly melts into confusion. Essentially, as a reader I am asked to accommodate to the rules of the poem.

But what are the implications of a poet constantly blurring the poem's subject in this manner? I have suggested possible subjects that emerge in "*And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name*" and "*The Wrong Kind of Insurance.*" But since these

subjects are never clearly defined and do not remain constant throughout, does this necessarily mean that Ashbery is not invested in these subjects? For example, I have mentioned the subjects of artistic creation, meaning in history, and the human perception of nature; and I have shown how, since these subjects appear and disappear so quickly within the poems, it is difficult to know if Ashbery is making a serious comment with the use of the subjects. But I am then faced with a problem when I encounter an Ashbery poem that *does* seem to put forth a constant subject. Does this imply that the subject is one Ashbery is particularly interested in and that he wants to express his thoughts on the subject to his readers? Or is he continuing to tease us by offering an obvious subject when his intention is something more subtle? I believe that this is an issue which has greatly affected Ashbery's reception in the literary community. I am referring especially to his early detractors who tended to dismiss his experimental style. For example, reviewer J. W. Hughes expressed a great sense of bitterness after reading *The Double Dream of Spring*. This excerpt from his review is rather lengthy, but I think it deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

The Doris Day of modernist poetry, [Ashbery] plays nasty Symbolist-Imagist tricks on his audience while maintaining a facade of earnest innocuousness. . . . [Some of his lines] have about as much poetic life as a refrigerated plastic flower. . . [and some] are trite and silly. . . . [His failure] is the price he has paid for uncritically accepting the Symbolist-Imagist esthetic. The contrived image and the pseudo-profound symbol may

enable a poet to continue his poem, despite the flaccid state of his emotion. . .but such a continuation may, in fact, embody a kind of poetic dishonesty. Ashbery is one of the inheritors of Eliot's Symbolist Waste Land. Eliot, at least, was honest about the agony and emotional barrenness he tried to describe. Ashbery, a professional mindblower, inhabits a Technicolor Waste Land where he seems to feel completely at home.¹⁰

What I find so interesting about this quote is that the reviewer seems to feel personally insulted by the "tricks" Ashbery plays on his audience. In Hughes' estimation, Ashbery's "poetic dishonesty" stems from a lack of authentic emotion. I must admit that I too prefer to read poetry which has some emotional element, some expression of feeling that I can engage with on a personal level. But I do not feel, as Hughes does, that Ashbery is excluded from this category. The difficulty of Ashbery is that the emotions change so markedly, from "flaccid" and disinterested to quite ecstatic, perhaps even within a single poem.

Some readers might be put off by the constant shift of emotional center in Ashbery's work. Similarly, the obscuring of subject that I have discussed may also be a source of frustration for readers. But occasionally the reader will encounter an Ashbery poem that does seem to have a coherent subject. The function of changing subject in the first two poems I have discussed is to make the reading process more challenging. But when Ashbery stays with one subject in a poem, we must ask new questions. Are we to assume that this

¹⁰J. W. Hughes. This quote comes from a review in *Saturday Review*, August 8, 1970, p. 34. But I found this reference in David Lehman's introduction to *Beyond Amazement*. p. 22.

subject is one Ashbery particularly cares about? Is the reader then supposed to come away with an increased awareness of the subject? Or do these poems simply recreate Ashbery's thought processes, in which case he probably has little interest in the reader's response?

"Pyrography"

I would like to discuss this new treatment of subject using a poem entitled "Pyrography." The subject of history, which we caught a glimpse of in "The Wrong Kind of Insurance," reappears in this poem as the unifying subject. I would suggest that this poem is specifically focused on the representation of American social history and how we are creating our own history of the present. Since I will discuss "Pyrography" in terms of how it operates as a coherent whole, I will quote the poem in its entirety before discussing it:

Pyrography

Out here on Cottage Grove it matters. The galloping
Wind balks at its shadow. The carriages
Are drawn forward under a sky of fumed oak.
This is America calling:
The mirroring of state to state,
Of voice to voice on the wires,
The force of colloquial greetings like golden

Pollen sinking on the afternoon breeze.
In service stairs the sweet corruption thrives;
The page of dusk turns like a creaking revolving stage in
Warren, Ohio.

If this is the way it is let's leave,
They agree, and soon the slow boxcar journey begins,
Gradually accelerating until the gyrating fans of suburbs
Enfolding the darkness of cities are remembered
Only as a recurring tic. And midway
We meet the disappointed, returning ones, without its
Being able to stop us in the headlong night
Towards the nothing of the coast. At Bolinas
The houses doze and seem to wonder why through the
Pacific haze, and the dreams alternately glow and grow dull.
Why be hanging on here? Like kites, circling,
Slipping on a ramp of air, but always circling?

But the variable cloudiness is pouring it on,
Flooding back to you like the meaning of a joke,
The land wasn't immediately appealing; we built it
Partly over with fake ruins, in the image of ourselves:
An arch that terminates in mid-keystone, a crumbling stone
pier

For laundresses, an open-air theater, never completed
And only partially designed. How are we to inhabit
This space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing,
As in a stage-set or dollhouse, except by staying as we are,
In lost profile, facing the stars, with dozens of as yet
Unrealized projects, and a strict sense
Of time running out, of evening presenting
The tactfully folded-over bill? And we fit
Rather too easily into it, become transparent,
Almost ghosts. One day
The birds and animals in the pasture have absorbed
The color, the density of the surroundings,
The leaves are alive, and too heavy with life.

A long period of adjustment followed.
In the cities at the turn of the century they knew about it
But were careful not to let on as the iceman and the milkman
Disappeared down the block and the postman shouted
His daily rounds. The children under the trees knew it
But all the fathers returning home
On streetcars after a satisfying day at the office undid it:
The climate was still floral and all the wallpaper
In a million homes all over the land conspired to hide it.
One day we thought of painted furniture, of how
It just slightly changes everything in the room
And in the yard outside, and how, if we were going
To be able to write the history of our time, starting with
today,

It would be necessary to model all these unimportant details
So as to be able to include them; otherwise the narrative
Would have that flat, sandpapered look the sky gets
Out in the middle west toward the end of summer,
The look of wanting to back out before the argument
Has been resolved, and at the same time to save appearances

So that tomorrow will be pure. Therefore, since we have to
do our business
In spite of things, why not make it in spite of everything?
That way, maybe the feeble lakes and swamps
Of the back country will get plugged into the circuit
And not just the major events but the whole incredible
Mass of everything happening simultaneously and pairing
off,
Channeling itself into history, will unroll
As carefully and as casually as a conversation in the next
room,
And the purity of today will invest us like a breeze,
Only be hard, spare, ironical: something one can
Tip one's hat to and still get some use out of.

The parade is turning into our street.
My stars, the burnished uniforms and prismatic
Features of this instant belong here. The land
Is pulling away from the magic, glittering coastal towns
To an aforementioned rendezvous with August and
December.
The hunch is it will always be this way,
The look, the way things first scared you
In the night light, and later turned out to be,
Yet still capable, all the same, of a narrow fidelity
To what you and they wanted to become:
No sighs like Russian music, only a vast unravelling
Out toward the junctions and to the darkness beyond
To these bare fields, built at today's expense.

It is difficult to know how to approach a poem of this length and complexity, so I will simply start at the beginning. The beginning of "Pyrography" has a narrative style which includes a clearly stated setting; the American Midwest. Cottage Grove is a community near Chicago, but the word "on" suggests that in this poem the name might refer to a street in some small town. Cottage Grove is presented in a romantic, almost genteel manner, as if it is the epitome of American small-town life. With phrases such as "this is America calling," Ashbery emphasizes the patriotic wholesomeness of settings such as Cottage Grove and Warren, Ohio. But Ashbery complicates this representation with some rather sinister

imagery. There is something mysterious and perhaps even scandalous going on in service stairs, and even the natural landscape is portrayed in an eerie, theatrical fashion. By the end of the stanza the Midwest is turned into a dark, secretive place disguised by its innocent facade.

Ashbery also alters the traditional romantic appeal of the boxcar journey. The travellers who embrace this myth for the freedom and adventure it promises will invariably be disappointed in their destination. So is the reader, for that matter, since the travellers who began as "they" turn into "we" along the way. What will greet the travellers at the West Coast is the same sense of listlessness that they fled from; even the houses "doze and wonder why." The America that Ashbery has presented thus far is dissatisfying to both traveller and reader, and it is in the next stanza that he offers specific criticisms: "The land wasn't immediately appealing; we built it/ Partly over with fake ruins, in the image of ourselves." Once again we see the theatrical comparison. America becomes a stage set where reality is painted over; furthermore, the false result is a direct reflection of ourselves. Marjorie Perloff has suggested that at this stage Ashbery takes us into an "imaginary world." She compares these false cities which emerge to Ashbery's own "lacustrine cities" (from a poem in the collection *Rivers and Mountains*). She writes, "These cities cannot be specified; they emerge as part of a theater

decor upon which the curtain may fall any minute."¹¹ Even though these stage-set cities cannot be specified, I would argue that this does not necessarily make them a product of Ashbery's dreamworld. I would suggest that Ashbery is further characterizing the mysterious, troubling America he presented in stanzas one and two.

It is the fourth stanza that specifically refers to issues of American myth and history. The direct and matter-of-fact statement, "A long period of adjustment followed" contributes to the notion of passing time and history in the poem. The phrase "period of adjustment" suggests that changes have occurred throughout time and throughout the poem. Ashbery is no longer just addressing the falseness of the landscape; he has now moved on to show how the inhabitants of this landscape have "adjusted" by becoming false themselves. This notion is suggested by the use of the pronoun "it" in the poem. "It" is a secret knowledge shared by children and manipulated by adults. Furthermore, there seems to be a conspiracy to disguise "it" as something else. This stanza suggests to me the type of myth traditionally associated with 1950's America. For instance, consider the milkman and the postman, the fathers (not mothers) returning from a hard day at work, the wallpaper in a million homes conspiring to hide "it." Whether Ashbery specifically addresses the 1950's or not, he certainly plays with the idea

¹¹Marjorie Perloff. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*. p. 276.

of the American nuclear household and how it has been perceived as the social ideal. But the truth of this poem is that there is a darkness beneath this facade of perfection; this dark side may even be the type of knowledge that the poem's "it" refers to.

But is Ashbery actually criticizing American society in this poem? I believe it is more accurate to say that he is criticizing the false representation of Americans through our own written history and our acceptance of American myths. He is illuminating the reality under the "fake ruins" we have built, both literally on the landscape and within our daily lives. If anything, the average American is portrayed quite sympathetically in "Pyrography," as each of us struggles to "inhabit/ This space from which the fourth wall is invariably missing." Ashbery's solution to the inherent falseness in society is to focus on creating an accurate "history of our time, starting with today," including the "unimportant details" such as the change that painted furniture makes in a room or in the yard. The implication is that this new, all-inclusive history will "invest us like a breeze" and help us better understand our lives. The most complicated aspect of this passage is the idea of purity that Ashbery presents. Somehow the "purity" of today rests in our capturing today accurately and creating a history that we can "get some use out of." This passage is difficult to interpret partly due to the following lines: "Therefore, since we have to do our business/ In spite of things, why not make it in spite of

everything?" Perhaps this just sets up the following lines, which are filled with a sense of energy and excitement for the history Ashbery invents before our eyes, one where "everything" is somehow included.

While Ashbery is suggesting a new version of history, he is also admitting to the difficulty of fashioning such a perfectly accurate history. After his impassioned speech about the "mass of everything happening simultaneously," he returns to a quieter tone and a more mundane scenario. We are back to a small-town scene which even includes a parade complete with shiny band uniforms. The sense is that despite Ashbery's suggestion for a radically new history, nothing has really changed. There will be "no sighs like Russian music, only a vast unravelling/ Out toward the junctions and to the darkness beyond/ To these bare fields, built at today's expense." Even though I am confused about the comment "built at today's expense," which may refer back to the idea of the questionable "purity" of today, I do get a general feeling from this ending; that life in America will continue on as before and everyday details may never become part of recorded history. This conclusion would make sense with the title of the poem, as "pyrography" is the art or process of producing designs on wood or leather by using heated tools or a flame.¹² The result is a semi-permanent inscription which will fade as time passes. In a sense Ashbery becomes a type of

¹²*The American Heritage Dictionary*. [2nd College Edition]. p. 1009.

"pyrographer," admitting to the fleeting nature of the representation of history through poetry as well as the impermanence and imperfection of any type of recorded history.

However, in suggesting that "Pyrography" has a more clearly-defined subject than most of Ashbery's other poems, I must remember Ashbery's tendency to manipulate his audience. He is certainly aware of the reader's tendency to search for a subject as a way to organize a difficult poem. Perhaps this use of an apparent subject is another way for Ashbery to challenge the reader and to make us examine our own reading practices. For example, I instantly responded to "Pyrography" and felt that I had to discuss it in my paper. I often come back to this poem while introducing Ashbery to a friend who has never encountered his poetry. I offer this poem as an example of his work because I feel a personal attachment to it, possibly because I feel I have a better grasp on the subject of this poem. But perhaps I am imposing subject on "Pyrography" to explain why it feels more coherent to me.

Perhaps the coherence of "Pyrography" is not so much a result of consistent subject as it is a result of Ashbery's use of setting and tone. The poem begins in the Midwest then describes a journey across America to the West Coast. The ending of the poem actually returns to this same small-town setting, a gesture which makes "Pyrography" seem more unified than most Ashbery poems. Another element which allows me to

feel more oriented within the poem is the way that I am included in the action throughout. In a sense, "we" become the Westward travellers and eventually even participate in Ashbery's writing of a new history. In the concluding stanza, the parade turns onto "our" street. And as I mentioned earlier, "Pyrography" is an example of an Ashbery poem that stands out for its highly emotional tone. For instance, the third stanza portrays humans as victims of a false landscape that is "only partially designed." The lines that follow suggest a desperate will to survive in this landscape. Personally, these lines make me think of my own "unrealized projects" and the constant fear of "time running out." Ashbery knows that we will respond to these universal fears as well as share the hope and excitement he expresses in stanza four, where he describes the complete history that could truly define who we are. Finally, I emerge from this poem feeling a connection with Ashbery and I even feel comfortable enough to venture a subject. And even if Ashbery does not have a deep, personal interest in the representation of American history, he allows me to believe in this subject and form my own personal attachment to the poem based on my own interests.

Where are We Now?

I began this discussion by addressing the various ways that critics have written about Ashbery. Since none of these models seemed entirely satisfactory, I attempted to devise my own method for working through selected Ashbery poems. But my discussion of just a few poems cannot be considered representative of my thoughts on Ashbery's work as a whole. I do not think any poem or small group of poems could be labeled "representative" of Ashbery, yet I must consider why it is that I narrowed my focus to these specific poems. The simplest answer is that I especially enjoy these poems and how they challenge me in new ways. Yet most of Ashbery's poems are even more challenging than the ones I have chosen. In many of his shorter poems, especially, we would be hard-pressed to locate even one or two possible subjects. These shorter pieces often seem like isolated snapshots, full of Ashbery's private associations and comically obscure details. It is easy to read through an Ashbery poem and move on to another without much deliberation. Obviously, when I chose to approach Ashbery's work critically, I needed find poems I felt I could spend some time with. Certainly part of my choice was based on my being able to locate at least some hint of subject within a poem.

But just as Hughes charged Ashbery with "poetic dishonesty," I feel that I might be equally guilty of a type of critical dishonesty. Like others who have written

critically about Ashbery, I have veered away from a discussion of his most puzzling works. But on the other hand, while "Pyrography" is somewhat unusual due to its treatment of subject and its more emotional tone, other poems that commonly come up in critical accounts are even less characteristic of Ashbery. For instance, several accounts mention his early poem "The Instruction Manual" from the volume *Some Trees*. This is an almost absurdly straightforward narrative about a manual writer who cannot stay on task; he gazes out the window and begins to daydream about Guadalajara. The poem is striking in that it doesn't look or feel like other Ashbery poems; in fact, it looks and feels remarkably like more traditional poetry (or even a piece of prose) in that there is one definite speaker and a narrative that proceeds in a linear fashion. Another example is Ashbery's long poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." This one is an obvious choice for critics, since it lends itself to a close comparison with Parmigianino's painting or to a more general discussion of the notion of ekphrasis. The reality is that most of Ashbery's poetry is nearly impossible to discuss critically, at least using the kind of critical vocabulary we have developed through the study of more traditional poets. It is therefore tempting for critics to choose more coherent poems in order to formulate a more coherent written discussion of Ashbery. My motivation for choosing some of his more subject-oriented, and therefore more coherent poems also relates to the fact that I simply

enjoy these poems better because they feel more familiar to me, yet at the same time offer enough challenge to make the reading experience unique.

But has my search for subject brought me any closer to an understanding of these poems? I believe it has, even though in the first two poems I was unable to pinpoint subject definitively. However, I do not think that studying Ashbery in this critical setting is the best way to enjoy his work. I suppose this generalization could be made about almost any kind of literature, but it is especially pertinent in the case of Ashbery. For example, Hughes' mention of "The Waste Land" caused me to further consider the differences between Eliot and Ashbery. My enjoyment and appreciation for "The Waste Land" definitely increased as I went back to study the individual sections critically. But this is not necessarily the case with Ashbery. At certain times during this project I found it almost absurd to be poring over the poems at such length. Each time I read a poem I found new, puzzling details which obscured any partial understanding I already had of the poem. I imagine that this happens to anyone who spends much time reading Ashbery and has the difficult task of reviewing his poetry or studying it critically.

I end this project with some sense of accomplishment, combined with the realization that my comments are far from complete. I do feel that discussing these poems in terms of subject is a useful pursuit, especially because it forces me

to read through a poem slowly, considering even the elements that contradict the subjects I have previously located.

Also, a discussion of subject allows me to better understand why I respond more strongly to certain Ashbery poems and why I am apt to forget many of them quickly. I might find myself describing "Pyrography" to someone as the Ashbery poem about America and history, whereas I might forget everything about "The Wrong Kind of Insurance" except for one theatrical detail that I especially treasure. Finally, there is a feeling of satisfaction in better understanding my affection for Ashbery's poetry, since this knowledge also helps me to better understand myself as a reader.

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Reading List:

- 1) Ashbery's *Selected Poems*.
- 2) "The Invisible Avant-Garde." Ashbery's Yale lecture reprinted in *Art News Annual*.
- 3) *The Heroes*. Ashbery's 1953 play. In *Artists' Theatre*.
- 4) Kenneth Koch's *Thank You and Other Poems*.